

# HOUSE . . . . . No. 4425

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## The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, February 26, 2024.

The committee on Education, to whom was referred the petition (accompanied by bill, House, No. 3567) of Natalie M. Blais and others relative to rural schools, reports recommending that the accompanying bill (House, No. 4425) ought to pass.

For the committee,

DENISE C. GARLICK.

**HOUSE . . . . . No. 4425**

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**The Commonwealth of Massachusetts**

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**In the One Hundred and Ninety-Third General Court  
(2023-2024)**  
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An Act to provide a sustainable future for rural schools.

*Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives in General Court assembled, and by the authority of the same, as follows:*

1           SECTION 1. Chapter 15 of the General Laws is hereby amended by adding the following  
2 section:-

3           Section 67. (a) There shall be within the department an office of shared services, which  
4 shall be under the supervision and management of the director of shared services. The director  
5 shall be appointed by the commissioner.

6           (b) The office of shared services shall oversee the formation of regional school districts  
7 and superintendent unions in the commonwealth. The director of shared services shall assist  
8 school districts that are considering forming or are in the process of forming regional school  
9 districts and superintendent unions with the research, development and execution of shared  
10 services projects and shared services agreements.

11           (c) Based on the review and analysis received from the center for health information and  
12 analysis pursuant to section 25 of chapter 12C of the General Laws, the office of shared services  
13 shall provide a report and make recommendations on strategies to improve coverage and reduce

14 costs including, but not limited to, recommendations related to membership in purchasing  
15 groups, combining plan design changes with health cost reimbursement arrangements and any  
16 other cost-reducing strategies that will not increase insurance costs for employees. The report  
17 shall be delivered to the clerks of the house of representatives and senate and the joint committee  
18 on education, the Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools and posted publicly on the  
19 center’s website on or before December 31, 2025.

20 SECTION 2. Chapter 12C of the General Laws is hereby amended by adding the  
21 following section:-

22 Section 25. (a) For the purposes of this section “rural school district” shall mean a school  
23 district with both of the following: (i) a student density of not more than 35 students per square  
24 mile and (ii) a per capita income of less than the average annual estimated, state-wide per capita  
25 income.

26 (b) The center shall perform a review and analysis of the range of health insurance plans  
27 that are in use across rural school districts in the commonwealth and shall provide the review and  
28 analysis to the office of shared services pursuant to section 67 of chapter 15 of the General Laws.

29 SECTION 3. Section 19 of chapter 15A of the General Laws, as appearing in the 2022  
30 Official Edition, is hereby amended by inserting after the figure “71”, in line 83, the following  
31 words:- ; provided, however that paraprofessionals seeking to obtain licensure as special  
32 educators shall have priority for such grants.

33 SECTION 4. Section 2 of chapter 70 of the General Laws, as so appearing, is hereby  
34 amended by inserting after the definition “Required net school spending” the following  
35 definition:-

36 “Rural school district”, a school district with both of the following: (i) a student density  
37 of not more than 35 students per square mile and (ii) a per capita income of less than the average  
38 annual estimated, state-wide per capita income.

39 SECTION 5. Said chapter 70B of the General Laws is hereby further amended by adding  
40 the following section:-

41 Section 22. Upon the closure of a school as a result of a school district regionalization  
42 effort, the authority, in collaboration with the executive office of housing and livable  
43 communities and the executive office of economic development shall offer assistance to the  
44 municipality wherein the school is located for the development of a plan for demolition or use of  
45 the school building for other purposes, including any technical assistance for school building  
46 reuse and the retrofitting of school buildings for other purposes.

47 SECTION 6. Section 16D of said chapter 71, as so appearing, is hereby amended by  
48 striking out subsection (g) and inserting in place thereof the following subsection:-

49 (g) A regional school district shall receive state aid for the transitional costs associated  
50 with the establishment of the regional school district. A regional school district shall be entitled  
51 to aid under this subsection for the first 3 years of its operation. The state treasurer shall, upon  
52 certification by the commissioner, annually, on or before November 20, pay to each regional  
53 school district in its first 3 years of operation \$200 per pupil enrolled by the regional school  
54 district.

55 SECTION 7. Said chapter 71 is hereby further amended by inserting after section 16I the  
56 following section:-

57           Section 16J. (a) There is hereby established and set upon the books of the commonwealth  
58 a separate fund known as the School District Regionalization Grant Fund. The fund shall be  
59 credited with: (i) appropriations or other money authorized or transferred by the general court  
60 and specifically designated to be credited to the fund; (ii) funds from public and private sources,  
61 including, but not limited to gifts, grants and donations; and (iii) any interest earned on such  
62 money. Amounts credited shall not be subject to appropriation and shall be expended by the  
63 department to fund a grant program for the study, planning and implementation of school district  
64 regionalization efforts to be administered by the department in accordance with this section; and  
65 provided further, that grant funds awarded pursuant to this section shall be distributed evenly  
66 over a 3 year period.

67           (b) A qualified school eligible for funding are towns and regional school districts,  
68 excluding vocational schools, independent agricultural, technical schools and charter schools;  
69 provided, that a school district shall be eligible for a school district regionalization grant if it is  
70 considering forming, is in the process of forming or has formed within the past 5 years a regional  
71 school district or regionalizing services; provided, that, that school district regionalization grants  
72 shall be allocated equitably in the following priority order: (i) school districts with significant  
73 enrollment decline; (ii) school districts where existing school space is underutilized; and (iii)  
74 school districts where the regionalization proposal will produce significant expansion of  
75 available academic resources and supports as a result of cost savings.

76           (c) Annually, not later than February 1, any district receiving funds under this item shall  
77 submit a report to the department outlining the progress the district has made in studying,  
78 planning or implementing regionalization or regionalization services.

79 (d) Annually, not later than December 1, the department shall submit a report to the  
80 house and senate committees on ways and means and the joint committee on education detailing  
81 the calculation and planned distribution of funds to school districts; provided, that, funds  
82 distributed from this section shall not be considered chapter 70 aid for the calculation of the  
83 minimum required local contribution for the upcoming fiscal year.

84 (e) Every 5 years, the department shall determine the adequacy of funding for the  
85 purposes of this section and recommend to the general court any necessary adjustment.

86 (f) A grant awarded to a school district pursuant to this section shall not exceed  
87 \$1,500,000 over a 3 year period.

88 SECTION 8. Said chapter 71B of the General Laws is hereby further amended by adding  
89 the following section:-

90 Section 17. (a) There shall be within the department a program to support the  
91 development of specialized teachers with targeted funding for local educator preparation  
92 programs for special education.

93 (b) The department shall facilitate the funding and implementation of the program so that  
94 school districts can coordinate with educational collaboratives and other providers to build “grow  
95 your own” programs and provide paid time off, or childcare stipends, to paraprofessionals  
96 studying to become licensed special education teachers.

97 (c) The program shall provide similar support to teachers currently licensed in other  
98 subjects to become special education teachers.

99           SECTION 9. (a) Notwithstanding any general or special law to the contrary, the  
100 department of elementary and secondary education shall conduct a review of special education  
101 regulations of the department as they pertain to the needs of rural school districts.

102           (b) The department shall request public comment and discussions with special education  
103 advocates, educators, school administrators, parents, and experts to explore reform of regulations  
104 under 603 CMR 28.00.

105           (c) The department shall publish a web page that serves as a one-stop resource to allow  
106 the public to obtain information and provide comments on individual rules and guidelines under  
107 review as well as the department's regulatory review program generally.